

How Greta became the face of climate activism; Swedish teenager has inspired millions globally to strike for the planet

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Body

Greta Thunberg was 11 when she stopped talking. She was diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome and selective mutism, meaning she only speaks when she thinks it's necessary.

Since then, the 16-year-old Swedish climate change activist has been raising her voice on some of the world's biggest stages, surrounded by thousands of people because the threat of climate change is one her generation can't ignore.

Her words, powerful as ever at this week's UN Climate Action Summit in New York, were felt and shared on social media by young people around the world, millions of whom are striking in her footsteps this week as part of the global movement she sparked last year when she started skipping school to sit outside the Swedish parliament and call for action on the climate crisis.

The teen has now become the face of a new generation determined to push their leaders to do more to save their future. She's also become a prime target for climate science deniers. The story of how it all began is simple and inspiring for many activists, young and old.

Last Friday kicked off the latest globally co-ordinated climate marches headed by Thunberg, with an estimated four million participants across 185 countries. Millions are expected to come out again this Friday: students stepping out of class, adults stepping away from work, and trade unions, businesses and other organizations supporting the action. In Canada, local organizers are planning dozens of strikes across the country. Thunberg will be attending Friday's rally in Montreal.

The massive scope of the movement and how much it has grown seems to have surprised Thunberg herself.

"It's just such a victory. I would never have predicted or believed that this was going to happen someday," she said to The Associated Press after last Friday's successful protests. "And so fast, only in 15 months."

Thunberg, in a Facebook post in February, said the idea of a strike came after she won a writing competition about the environment held by Swedish newspaper Svenska Dagbladet in May 2018.

Her article was published and afterward Bo Thoren from Fossil Free Dalsland reached out to her to ask her to meet with other young people and discuss ideas for bringing attention to the climate crisis. One of Thoren's ideas was a school strike, inspired by students in Parkland, Fla., who refused to go to school after the mass shooting in Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School.

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It was in August 2018 that Thunberg first began to openly protest ahead of Sweden's general election. Instead of going to school, she sat for three weeks on the steps outside parliament in her hometown of Stockholm, quietly handing out pamphlets that said "I am doing this because you adults are sh-tting on my future."

She posted about her protest on social media, which soon went viral and attracted the attention of news media.

School seemed insignificant when the world was burning, she told passersby, according to a *Guardian* article written about the teen's protest. At the time, Sweden was hit with wildfires and its hottest summer on record.

After that election, Thunberg has continued to strike every week under the Fridays for Future movement, which has been picked up by students around the world who have organized smaller-scale rallies and events on Fridays. This week's rallies are the latest action, with more than 3,000 upcoming strikes registered around the world.

People, including youth, had been fighting for political action on climate change long before Thunberg came along, said University of Toronto School of Environment lecturer Douglas Macdonald. But it had been "a really hard sell" to urge older generations to pay a cost to stop the effects of climate change, which they may never see in their lifetimes.

Instead, activists have been trying to frame the threat as an unfair burden on younger generations. And Thunberg, with her signature braids, has become the perfect face for that intergenerational injustice.

"The kindling was all there, ready, and she came along and lit the fire and I think that resonates," he said.

Thunberg was about eight years old when she first heard about climate change and global warming, she said during a *Tedx* talk in December. It confused her when adults said the threat was real but didn't do anything to change our way of life.

As she got older, she began to push her mom, an opera singer, and dad, an actor, to make lifestyle changes, such as cutting down on flying and going vegan. Eventually, she turned to challenging politicians.

On Wednesday, Thunberg was one of four winners of the Right Livelihood Award, also known as the "Alternative Nobel." She has also been nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize.

Thunberg spoke to world leaders at the 2018 UN Climate Change Conference in December and also spoke at the World Economic Forum in Davos in January. For this year's climate summit, Thunberg travelled across the Atlantic to New York City from Europe in a zero-emissions sailboat to make a point about the harmful impact of airplanes.

"She's truly what a climate change activist is. She's not fake," said Wilfrid Laurier University student Caroline Vartanian. "She's educated me a lot. I wouldn't know half the facts or be an 'activist' that I am if it really wasn't for her."

Vartanian, 20, said she attends Fridays for Future events regularly at university and in Toronto. She said Thunberg's determination and commitment is inspiring.

"She goes on the stage and doesn't let anything stop her," Vartanian said.

That includes the wave of criticism and in some cases outright hate that's been directed at the teen since she took up the fight for climate action. U.S. President Donald Trump mocked her in a tweet after her UN speech on Monday (which Thunberg turned into a line for her Twitter bio), and People's Party of Canada Leader Maxime Bernier called her "mentally unstable."

Some have pointed out that activists who are young Indigenous people and people of colour should be celebrated alongside Thunberg. For instance, Autumn Peltier, a 15-year-old from Wiikwemkoong First Nation on Manitoulin Island in Ontario, spoke to the UN General Assembly last year and is advocating for water protection in Indigenous communities at the climate summit this week.

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But Thunberg, whose Fridays for Future rallies have blown up globally, remains the most widely recognized as the rallying force behind the recent surge of youth climate activism.

"She doesn't stop and she really stands for what she believes in," Vartanian said. "She really shows that when you're passionate about something and you pursue it, anything can happen."

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